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ABSTRACT

There is a close connection between illiteracy and poverty at all levels--global, national, and subnational; the countries with the lowest levels of literacy are also the poorest economically. Poverty breeds illiteracy by forcing children to drop out of school to work, and these illiterate people are forced to stay on the lowest levels of the work force and thus remain in poverty. Thus illiteracy in turn reinforces poverty, and poverty is cyclical in families. Women and girls are especially vulnerable to the cycle. In order to break the cycle of illiteracy, a multipronged program against poverty must be carried out. In India and in some other developing countries, every 5-year program has a broad antipoverty component that includes a minimum needs program, an intensified and effective employment program, specific development programs, an assets redistribution program, an increase in the flow of real income, work toward a national income policy, and legislation promoting tenancy reform and surplus land distribution, minimum wages, and equal status for women. Literacy education has a specific role--to train illiterate adults in reading, writing, and arithmetic, to equip them with some income-generating skills, and to raise awareness of societal needs. (KC)

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LITERACY LESSONS

CE 055 129

INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR

Illiteracy and poverty

by Malcolm S. Adiseshiah

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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INTERNATIONAL BUREAU OF EDUCATION

There is a sombre coincidence between illiteracy and poverty.

Globally, the nine countries which Unesco identifies as accounting for 75.2% of the world's illiterates – India, China, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Indonesia, Brazil, Egypt and the Islamic Republic of Iran are all, excepting Brazil, among the poorest countries in the world according to the World Bank classification. The remaining 149 countries, whose illiterates are 24.8% of the 1985 world total of 889 million, are concentrated in Africa, where 47 countries out of 50 have illiteracy rates above 25%, ranging from over 30–35% in Botswana, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya and Madagascar to 83–88% in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Somalia, and in Asia where in 23 countries out of 39 illiterates comprise more than 25% of the population, ranging from 30–40% in Kuwait and the Syrian Arab Republic to 57–86% in Afghanistan, Nepal and Yemen. These 72 countries are in the two lowest income categories, as Table 1 illustrates.

In the national context, a similar juxtaposition of poverty and illiteracy is found.

At the sub-national level, the coincidence of high illiteracy and high poverty rates is even more striking. In my state, the State of Tamil Nadu, India, the districts which have a greater than 50% literacy rate are: Madras (66%), Chingleput (50%), Coimbatore (52%), Nilgiris (54%), Thanjavur (50%). Tirunelveli (51%) and Kanyakumari (68%). These are regions which also have high per capita incomes derived from well-developed manufacturing industries and agriculture. Similarly, in the district of Kaira in Gujarat, where dairying has become a way of life for the peasants of the district, the literacy rate is a high 82%. In contrast, the districts with

TABLE 1. Illiteracy and poverty among various countries and regions

Country	No. of illiterates (millions)	Illiteracy percentage	Per capita income 1986 (U.S.$)	Rank among 129 countries
India	264	56.5	290	109
China	229	30.9	300	107
Pakistan	39	70.4	350	101
Bangladesh	37	66.9	160	123
Nigeria	27	57.6	640	81
Indonesia	26	25.9	490	87
Brazil	19	22.3	1810	55
Egypt	16	55.5	760	75
Islamic Republic of Iran	12	49.2	920	78
East and Central Africa (27 countries)	16.9	50.3	180	119
Southwest and East Asia (10 countries)	7.8	30	500	74
Latin America (21 countries) and Caribbean	43.6	17.3	2000	46

Source: Unesco. Office of Statistics. Division of Statistics on Education. *Compendium of statistics on illiteracy*. Paris, 1988.
World Bank. *World development report, 1988*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1988.

large numbers of people living in poverty – Ramanathapuram (52%), Pasumpon Muthuramalingam (56%), Pudukottai (53%), Kamarajar (50%), Periyar (50%) are those with low literacy rates of between 42–53%. Other areas with low literacy and large numbers living in poverty are five districts in Orissa, eight districts in East UP and seven districts in Bihar.

Thus the rather close connection between illiteracy and poverty at all levels – global, national and sub-national – is a fact.

Poverty and illiteracy

The question then arises whether poverty and illiteracy are related in a cause and effect relationship. Is poverty the cause of illiteracy, or obversely is illiteracy the cause of poverty? The empirical evidence presented above shows a juxtaposition of the two, a correlation of poverty and illiteracy and illiteracy and poverty, but not a causal relationship. There is reason to believe that poverty reinforces illiteracy, by forcing the parents and children to work full time, earning their living at rather low-level unskilled jobs, and thus foregoing schooling and other forms of education.

Surveys conducted in Tamil Nadu, and in India as a whole on the reasons for dropping out from primary education classes and adult literacy centres show the overwhelming dominance of the need for the learner to work on a full time basis in the field or the family farm, or in the family handicraft or handlooms, or, in the case of girls, to stay home to care for small children, and help cook for the family, as Table 2 shows.

The table shows that the non-attendance at schools and literacy education centres is only slightly related to educational causes (20% for schools and 30% for literacy centres). The economic factor is the predominant cause for dropping out of school (75–80%), somewhat less important for dropping out of literacy centres (55% for men, but over 75% for women).

In this connection, the surveys refer to three features related to the data in the table. First, the commonly cited definition of literacy as the equivalent of four years of primary schooling calls for reflection. The school wastage rates of 51.2% in the state of Tamil Nadu and 62% for all India in the first four years of schooling mean that more than half the children enter-

TABLE 2. Reasons for dropping out of school (as %)

Reasons for dropping out	Tamil Nadu Primary education		All India Primary education		Tamil Nadu Literacy centres		All India Literacy centres	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Men	Women	Men	Women
Working in farm or factory	70	15	76	20	55	65	52	70
Looking after the home	5	67	4	70		10		15
Irrelevant curriculum	10	5	6	5	35	5	30	5
Poor teaching and repetition	10	5	9					
Non-existent facilities	5	8	5	5	10	18	18	10

Source: Tamil Nadu (India). State Resource Centre. *Annual report.* Madras, 1987.
National Adult Education Programme (India). *Report, 1980-81.* Madras, Madras Institute ofDevelopment Studies.

ing the school every year in the state will be added to the 53% of adult illiterates in the state, and nearly two thirds of primary school enrollees are added to the country's 56.4% illiterates by the time they reach adulthood. In other words, the school system, conceived as an answer to illiteracy is paradoxically contributing to the problem of illiteracy.

Secondly, there seems to be a sad relation in Tamil Nadu between the 51.2% wastage and the 40% of people in the rural areas and 60% in the urban areas who have been identified as living in poverty. Similar figures were also found during the All-India survey. This means that the drop-outs and the illiterate poor are not two classes apart: they belong to the same group, giving rise to the presumption that the poor and their children are denied education.

Thirdly, there is a tenuous relation between dropping out and stagnation or repetition. The Table above shows that the educational causes for stagnation (which are the irrelevant curriculum, poor teaching and repetition) account for 20% of the boys leaving school and

half that for girls. As noted earlier, the major reason for non-attendance at school (75–80% in the case of boys, both in Tamil Nadu and in all India) is the need to work on the farm and factory or to a small extent look after the house. Similarly, for 82–90% of the girls, both in Tamil Nadu and all India, non-attendance is due to caring for the home and children, and cooking and carrying food to the parents at work in the farm or factory.

In the case of adult literacy centres, there is a difference in the effect of poverty on literacy learning. The economic factors (having to work in the farm or factory) are a major cause among men for non-attendance or dropping out of literacy classes. But equally important are the educational factors – the irrelevant and inadequate teaching content and materials, and the lack of facilities. In the case of women illiterates, the major factor for their non-attendance or dropping out of literacy programmes is economic (75–85%), while educational inadequacies play a minor role.

The above picture, which reflects mainly conditions prevailing in the rural areas, relates to both the state and the country as a whole, since, as in all developing countries 70–80% of the people live in rural areas. But urban illiteracy and poverty, though quantitatively less than half that of the rural areas, are equally tragic. A socio-economic survey of Madras slums highlights this factor.

In Madras, a city of 4 million people, 1.4 million live in slums with four to nine members in each family, having a living space of 29 sq metres. Here the literacy rate is around 40%. In comparison to the village literacy rate of 71% for males and 53% for females, slum literacy is 54% for males and 30% for females. As in the rural areas, the major cause for dropping out of school and not attending literacy classes is attributed to poverty and its consequent need for both men and women (51%), to work to eke out a living. Only 18% is attributed to educational factors.

THE CONVERSE: ILLITERACY AND POVERTY

Illiteracy in turn reinforces poverty. To understand this relationship of illiteracy to poverty, it is necessary to see illiteracy as part of the complex of deprivations and discriminations which has come to be termed 'the culture of poverty'. This is important, because taken alone we think of illiteracy as being the lack of education, or more specifically the lack of the 3Rs. We think of poverty as being the deprivation of what are called 'wage goods' – food, clothing and housing. Illiteracy is much more than the lack of learning, as its accompanying features reveal, and poverty is much more than the lack of goods and services, as it is associated with 'incompetence' as perceived both by the elite and by the poor themselves.

Data from surveys in India show this unidimensional view of poverty and illiteracy. That is to say how illiteracy is also related with high levels of poverty. High levels of poverty accompany low shares of assets and high illiteracy rates. As poverty declines, asset shares increase and illiteracy rates decline to a sharper degree. Its basic message is clear. But the table could also be misleading, because poverty and illiteracy are associated with some cultural traits of the poor and the illiterate which relate, inter alia, to a complex web of attitudes, behaviour patterns, value systems, earning, spending and borrowing patterns, time orientation, inter-personal, inter-household and intra- and inter-caste socio-ethnic relationships of a fixed underprivileged class – a kind of permanent Indian (and Third World) proletariat.

This complex of poverty cum illiteracy is both general and specific in its content, character, nature, environment and scope. In its context, it preserves the

positive traditional values of community unity and sub-caste solidarity, as it does the negative traits of preoccupation with money and material goods, sometimes involving dishonesty and cheating.

In its character, it promotes intra-family inequalities, relegating women and girls to a lower position in the family, giving the general feeling in society that it is less important to educate girls than to educate boys, that boys should have preference over girls for the little food that is available in the house, thus reducing girls' staying power in school; moreover, girls more than boys are affected by a lack of adequate and proper clothing. The result is that illiteracy among adult women is double that of men. Among India's scheduled castes, male literacy is 23.56% and female literacy is 5.67%; among the scheduled tribes it is even lower, at 5.91% and 1% respectively.

In its nature, poverty is hereditary, being passed from one generation to the next, with the few who climb out of the poverty morass being quickly absorbed into the upper class culture along with a kind of alienation, with no outreach to the remaining members of the poverty group from which they emanate.

Its environment involves low income, inequality, socio-cultural deprivation due to class and caste hierarchies, early separation from home and family, illiteracy, no or incomplete and inadequate schooling, low educational level of parents, poor housing in isolated rural or urban slum areas.

This interweaving of poverty with illiteracy is also specific, in the sense that its specific content, character, nature and environment vary from one village to another and from one locality to the other, so that no global or even national or district blueprint can deal with its unique specificities. They can only offer broad guidelines.

One feature of this complex is the special nature of discrimination suffered by women and girls, concomi-

In this portrayal, the pattern that emerges is an orientation to helplessness and powerlessness, resulting in a structural model characterized by low need for achievement, low need for extension and high need for dependency, expressed through lack of initiative, the avoidance syndrome, excessive fear of failures, seeking favours of superiors, and ascribing any success to external factors, such as a benevolent government, or lucky fate or a kind God or kindly Nature, while ascribing all failures to one's own inadequacies, which is a kind of internalized mechanism of self-disparagement.

tant with a verbal (hypocritical) worship of women as deities (Goddess Saraswati for learning and wisdom, Goddess Lakshmi for wealth and beauty, Goddess Parwati or Mary as the consort or mother of god). Their human counterparts are, however, denied learning and are treated as devoid of wisdom; their claims to equal shares in income, wealth and employment, particularly priestly employment, are denied in law and tradition. One facet of this discriminating element is the middle and upper class tradition in India and some other Third World countries in which, as the income of the farm family rises, the status symbol of such well-being demands that the women of the family withdraw from the workforce (and also from all responsibility for sharing in the management of the farm or the cottage industry), and women from the poorer parts of the country are hired to work as casual labourers on the most physically demanding forms of agricultural labour. Thus studies show that as the Punjab farm family income increases, the women of the family are made to withdraw from all work, and their place in the field is taken by women imported from Bihar and East Uttar Pradesh.

THE TASK FACING ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMMES

The above portrayal of the multi-pronged nature of poverty has implications for literacy policies and programmes, just as the illiteracy–poverty juxtaposition analysed earlier has very specific educational implications.

The first negative lesson which our experience over the last fifty years in the developing countries has shown is that an isolated attack against illiteracy through night schools, 'each one teach one' programmes, ad hoc voluntary agencies or government efforts is a frustrated and frustrating non-starter. That is how the illiteracy fight began, which was lost even before it lasted for a few months or years, without producing any results. That is why we have now realised that the fight against illiteracy must be part of a multi-pronged fight against the multi-faceted nature of poverty, of which it is an integral part.

In India (and some other developing countries), every five-year plan has a broad anti-poverty programme which comprises:

- *a minimum needs* (or basic needs) *programme*, involving government provision to the rural and urban poor of drinking water, electricity, road construction, health and nutrition facilities, primary and adult literacy education, and urban slum upgrading as essential infrastructural facilities;
- an intensified and effective *employment programme*, which matches employment opportunities in agriculture, fertilizers, animal husbandry, forestry, fishery, small villages and large industries to the location, skills and idle time of the unemployed or underemployed,

- *specific development programmes* for the long-discriminated scheduled castes, tribes and backward areas of the country,
- an *assets redistribution programme*, starting with placing a ceiling on the amount of land ownership – both rural and urban – and distributing the surplus to the landless poor,
- an *increase in the flow of real income* of the low income groups through enlarging the Public Distribution System of fair-price shops and ensuring a larger share of credit distribution and material input to the small producer,
- *working towards a national income policy* covering all incomes, wages, profits and rents, which will establish an acceptable disparity between the highest and lowest per capita income, and reorganizing the fiscal system so that resources are generated from those able to pay and not, as at present, from the poor (96% of state revenues are derived from indirect taxation), and
- above all, as the means to help change attitudes, behaviour patterns and senses of powerlessness, and to promote the organization of the poor by legislating for them in tenancy reform, surplus land distribution, minimum (fair) wages, and equal status for women.

I would end this section with one piece of empirical evidence, which was also my personal experience. As a group of forty illiterates assembled every night for two hours at the literacy hut that they had built, I noticed that the first hour was spent in discussing their own problems – the high price of rice and vegetables, their low wages (in money and kind), the unpaid, heavy domestic work of the women, and the additional hour to learn the 3Rs. After a month, the first hour of conversation turned to the existence of the eighteen acres of empty common land in front of the literacy hut, leading to the decision to divide the land among the heads of the forty families and occupy it for farming. When they did this, the landed gentry in the village summoned the police (who are always on the side of the rich and powerful), and evicted the forty men who had occupied the common land and destroyed their fences. At the next meeting, the learners asked for details on the Land Ceiling Act, and decided to walk to Madras (forty km away) to visit the Minister of Land Reforms and place their case before him. The Minister received them, heard their case, and agreed that the common land belonged to them; but the officials of the ministry raised technical objections and thus stalled the execution of the Minister's decision. On coming to Madras on the fourth occasion, they passed a group of persons sitting in front of the office and fasting, to protest an injustice done to them. On their fifth visit, they found the place clear, and on enquiry, heard that the protesting people had succeeded in getting their wrong righted. Promptly, instead of going in to see the Ministers who were waiting for them, they sat outside the office for two days, fasting in relays, until the government order was passed and read to them, restoring the surplus land to them. This example of organized action spread rapidly to other villages, and was one answer to the problem of attitudes and helplessness mentioned earlier. Literacy was developed as an integral by-product.

In this multi-pronged attack against the complex factors comprising poverty and illiteracy, literacy education has a specific and irreplaceable role, as our experience in India and the developing countries illustrates.

The first and primordial task of literacy education is to train illiterate adult men and women in the tools of literacy – reading, writing and arithmetic. This task has been recently denigrated and decried in many evaluations of the national adult literacy programme, as having reduced the programme to the imparting of 'mere literacy'. It should be noted that this critique is made by the educated upper and middle classes, who have themselves spent four years acquiring the tools of literacy in primary school, and who have their sons and daughters going through the same drill today. This acquisition of literacy by the poor is essential in order for them to learn how to read instructions for farming or using a simple machine, for knowing about the provisions legislated for them, and being able to write appeals against their contraventions. This is not to deny the wealth of evidence that the linguistic and communication codes developed by the poor adult man and woman are restricted, simplistic, undifferentiated and above all, tend to reinforce the existing injust social structure. But these can be countered, as demonstrated by the adult education centres in which literacy classes have helped men and women from poor rural and urban areas develop their communications skills, so that their speech patterns approach those of the non-poor. From these various points of view, this cornerstone of adult education, the literacy tool, is both crucial and decisive.

One persistent problem is the motivation of the illiterate adult, which actually is no different from the

motivation of the school student during the first five primary classes, but which is related to the inadequately equipped and sometimes appalling locations of the literacy centres, and to the ill-prepared, uncommitted and sometimes incompetent literacy instructor.

The second task of literacy education is the functional responsibility of equipping the illiterate adult with some income-generating skills in order that he/she may increase the family income. Evidence is revealing the demand of illiterate women to be trained in skills which will be income-generating, not the traditional lines which keep them dependent on the male family members. For this purpose literacy education is made available to small groups of two or three female neighbours, so that there is no need to set aside a separate learning time and disrupt domestic responsibilities. Further, as women in our societies are considered more responsible than men for the health and well-being of the family, there exists an inbuilt motivation in health-related issues among women. It was also found that literacy education built around income-augmenting new crafts was received enthusiastically. While small-scale production of handicrafts may not be the long-run answer to social transformation (of the Third World countries), this felt-need is being used to get women together to work on common goals, to analyse the

On launching a massive 4.6 thousand million rupee employment programme to provide fifty to one hundred days' work to one member each of 44 million families living below the poverty line and to be administered by each village Council, Rajiv Gandhi said: 'Every villager would know how much money he and the others are receiving. Those who are cheated or deprived will not only have the possibility of demanding immediate redress, they will also have in their hands the ultimate weapon of the vote to turn out of office any elected head who abuses the power and responsibilities devolved on him'. The basis for all this is literacy.

feasibility of augmenting their income through such projects and in this process become aware of the basic issues regarding the present economic structure.

A new literacy education campaign, launched by the government of India under the captions 'Mass literacy' and 'Technology Literacy Missions', involves adult functional literacy programmes for several groups of men and women, for the scheduled castes and tribes and for all adult illiterates in the age group 15-35. Classroom participation, library and reading room membership, correspondence sources and mass-media, or a combination of all these instruments, are being used. The major problem faced is the coordination of the various specialized disciplines, departments and groups in making a concerted integrated effort in each village or slum, replacing the administrative duplication which is the current scene.

Finally, literacy education has the task of, and is an instrument for, awareness-creating. Literacy education is a means of 'conscientizing' the illiterate, discriminated and exploited men or women living in poverty. It has an important role in combating the illiteracy–poverty complex at the political and structural level through the technical/functional programme discussed above. At the political structural level, literacy education classes (which number over half a million a day in just one country, India,) are becoming the means for the poor to organize themselves to fight for their rights, and to ensure that the various facilities which are legislated and earmarked for them actually reach them. In literacy education, developing as a self-reliant, autonomy-inducing instrument of the illiterate poor in their continuing fight for their rights, there are strong opposing forces. In the societies of most developing countries, there is a structural dualism in which all power, political, economic and cultural, is concentrated in a minority which opposes and uses a dispossessed, assetless majority. Every effort to change this order (or disorder)

in society meets with strong resistance, in which all the forces of law and order are involved on the side of the status quo. Thus the involvement in literacy education is a risky undertaking. The call of the International Literacy Year is a call to all educated peoples to commit themselves to this risky undertaking. Literacy education is technical in helping shape the tools of education, is functional in imparting skills which must augment inadequate incomes, and is political in transforming the helpless into the helper, the powerless into the powerful. The call to us is to be involved in all these essential facets of literacy education. Will we respond to the call?

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The International Bureau of Education acknowledges with grateful thanks this contribution by Malcolm S. Adiseshiah to the cause of Literacy. After a distinguished career in education, including that of Deputy Director General of Unesco, Dr Adiseshiah is at present president of the Governing Board of the International Institute for Educational Planning and Chairman of the Madras Institute for Development Studies. His numerous publications include *Let my country awake* and *It is time to begin*.

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